



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Lady Anne Halkett: A Life in Writing

Citation for published version:

Trill, S 2008, 'Lady Anne Halkett: A Life in Writing', pp. 23-25, nls discover, 7.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher final version (usually the publisher pdf)

Published In:

nls discover

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Trill, S. (2008). Lady Anne Halkett: A Life in Writing. nls discover 7 (pp. 23-25).

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



sporting leases and factors’ correspondence to specifications and plans for sporting lodges. Henry Kirby’s albums with their illustrations of the visitors’ daily activities on the moor and in the Lodge complement these records.

Fox’s lease gave him ‘the exclusive right of shooting all kinds of Game and Deer (Hinds excepted) and the right of Angling on the River Halladale.’ The moor ‘was to be shot over in a fair and sportsman-like manner and a good stock left on the ground for breeding’. No more than ten stags per year were to be shot. As tenant, Fox agreed to ‘appoint and pay an efficient Keeper to act as a watcher over the ground’ throughout the year. Exclusive use of Forsinard Shooting Lodge came with the lease. Where previously sportsmen had found accommodation where they could, now landowners provided furnished housing as part of an attractive package for their sporting tenants. Much of this property was built specially for the seasonal visitors and sparked a mini building boom. Forsinard Lodge offered ample accommodation for Fox, his family, friends and servants together with a Keeper’s House, Kennels and Ghillies’ Bothy. Again, the tenant was responsible for employing staff and Fox was to ‘appoint and pay a competent housekeeper to keep the lodge in good order and properly aired.’

With transport, accommodation, staff and sport arranged, William Fox and his party headed north each August returning in October. A typical day at Forsinard involved a hearty early breakfast followed by a long pony ride with the ghillies who had local knowledge of the best place to find deer. The deer-stalkers would stay on the moor for most of the day, returning exhausted in the evening having ridden, walked or even crawled for miles. Generally, the men shot and fished while the women and children remained at the Lodge. There was little for them to do there save wait for their men folk to return and recount their exploits.

The attraction of deer-stalking, as for other holidays, lay principally in the freedom from everyday routine; it was also exciting and exotic, offering vigorous outdoor exercise and mental stimulation. This was the sport of the elite but was also within reach of relatively wealthy individuals with plenty of free time. However, with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the demand for sporting holidays inevitably declined and sheep grazed the hillsides previously cleared for deer. Although tourists returned with the peace there was never again such an appetite for shooting and fishing.



Henry Kirby did not survive to see these changes himself as he died at Forsinard Lodge in September 1912 a few hours after shooting a stag. As a later note in his albums records, ‘On returning from the moor to the Lodge he suddenly got ill and fell down in the smoke room. Wyld and Fox got him to bed but he died shortly afterwards. He was buried at the Crofters’ Graveyard a pretty spot near the River he so often fished. The ceremony was attended by many of the local Ghillies who held him in great esteem.’

nls

Above: Documents from the Sutherland Estates papers relating to William Fox’s tenancy of Forsinard Shootings and Fishings.

Courtesy of the Countess of Sutherland.

Discover more

Henry Kirby’s albums, 1869-1912

1

Shelfmark: Acc.12786

The National Library of Scotland holds the estate papers of many Scottish landholding families. In addition to the Sutherland papers, the Ellice of Invergarry papers are of particular significance for sporting tourism with game books for 1841-1909, and Katharine Jane Ellice’s drawings of hunting and domestic scenes.

Sutherland Estates papers:

1

Shelfmarks: Dep.313; Dep.314

1

Shelfmarks: Acc.10225; Acc.10853; Acc.12173

Ellice of Invergarry papers:

1

Shelfmark: MSS.15001-15195

Learn more about the Library’s Manuscript collections online at: www.nls.uk/collections/manuscripts

Hart-Davis, Duff, *Monarchs of the Glen* (London, 1978)

1

Shelfmark: H3.78.5149

Durie, Alastair J. *Scotland for the Holidays. Tourism in Scotland, c.1780-1939* (East Linton, 2003)

1

Shelfmark: HP2.203.03366

From religious wrangling, to the trials of daily domestic life, **Dr Suzanne Trill**, Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, profiles the work of early Dunfermline essayist and diarist Lady Anne Halkett, and shows how her ‘Meditations’ were anything but ‘Occasional.’

Lady Anne Halkett: A Life in Writing



Lady Anne Halkett will be an unfamiliar figure to many readers, but those who have visited Abbot House in Dunfermline may recall that she is immortalised there in ‘a room of her own’ which represents her, surrounded by devotional texts, as engaged in the act of writing. Tucked among the extensive Pifirrane papers in the NLS manuscript collection are a series of 14 volumes of her devotional writing, which certainly bear testimony to her apparently life-long habit of daily writing.

In fact, according to her biographer Simon Couper, Halkett actually produced a series of 21 volumes in total, plus ‘about thirty stitched Books, some in Folio, some in Quarto, most of them of 10 or 12 sheets, all containing occasional Meditations’¹. Mysteriously, seven of these volumes are missing, but it is perhaps more mysterious that the 14 extant volumes have, so far, received hardly any attention. For, while Couper and Halkett define their contents as ‘select’ and ‘occasional’ meditations, from a modern perspective, the occasional entries in particular appear to have more in common with the essay, diary or autobiography. Collectively, they represent a veritable treasure trove of information about local, national and international political events; the theological disputes between the Presbyterians and Episcopalians (especially in Dunfermline) through the 1670s to the 1690s; the difficulties involved in organising the household; and the intensity of emotional attachments and personal experiences. In short, they depict Halkett’s life in writing.

Like Halkett, this genre of the ‘occasional meditation’ has so far received little critical attention but it was first brought to popular attention by the publication of Bishop Joseph Hall’s *Occasional Meditations* in 1606. It was revitalised in 1665 when Robert Boyle published his *Occasional Reflections*. Halkett saw herself writing in this tradition and her writing attests that it was Hall’s ‘example’ which first drew her to this practice. The influence of both writers can be seen in parallel subjects: Hall’s book includes a meditation ‘upon the sight of a grave digged up’², Halkett’s ‘Upon a Grave maker’³; and Boyle’s upon ‘His Horse stumbling in a very fair way’⁴ has its analogue in Halkett’s ‘upon a fall Sr James had off a Mare’.⁵

However, even from her earliest surviving volume of such meditations, Halkett moves way beyond the generally innocuous subject matters discussed by Hall and Boyle. She comments on ‘the peace made betwixt France & Spaine’ and ‘upon the return of his Mast afftir his long banishment’.⁶ She also regularly alludes to

contemporary debates over the matter of church government: considering the 1669 Act of Supremacy, she begins ‘there is few things that have been done of Late that have occasioned more variety of opinions then this late Act and most is unsatisfied with itt, because itt seemes to Crose [cross] what either party aimed att in having absolute power in the Church’.⁷

Unlike any of the published materials by male contemporaries, Halkett also makes space for consideration of household events, as well as intimate and personal experiences including miscarriage and childbirth. Dissent amongst servants is also a recurrent theme. Possibly the most heart-rending entry in her entire collection is that which records her grief at the death of her beloved daughter Betty just months before her fourth birthday: this was, she writes, ‘like tearing a great piece of my soule from mee’.⁸

The lengthiest entries among the Occasional Meditations also focus on personal experience: specifically, they record her devastation at the death of her husband, Sir James Halkett of Pitfirrane, in 1670, her ‘deplorable’ state in having become a widow; and her difficulty in reconciling herself to leaving Pitfirrane House and moving to Dunfermline. From her husband’s death until her own in April 1699, Halkett regularly commemorates this event not only annually but also sets aside Saturdays for weekly contemplation of both it and God’s graciousness to her. Following St. Paul’s advice in 1 Timothy 5 from the New Testament, Halkett is determined to be ‘a Widow Indeed’. That this was her primary sense of self-identification is witnessed not only in her continual reiteration of this phrase but also in her actions.

For, like the ideal widow described by St Paul, the extent of Halkett’s ‘Meditations’ and the time she spent on them (as well as her time instructing her household in prayer and devotion) indicate that she continued her supplications →



Right: Abbot House in Dunfermline, where Halkett spent most of her life.

Left: One of 14 surviving volumes of Halkett's writings.

Below: A waxwork of Halkett posed at her writing desk at Abbot House, the only verified likeness of her.

day and night; her good works included operating a weekly surgery for the poor, sending medical supplies to those in need, and acting as a midwife for women of different social positions; she also brought up children and lodged ‘strangers’ when she took in young boarders, who could then attend the local grammar school. These activities likewise testify to her assisting the afflicted, which she also endeavoured to do with regular alms giving.

Although Halkett continues to refer to these later entries as ‘occasional meditations’, it is striking that the volumes written during her lengthy widowhood are primarily organised by date rather than subject matter. To the modern eye, this associates them with diary entries. This habit also reveals the frequency of Halkett’s writing practice: in one volume, for example, nearly half of the entries were written on either Monday or Saturday. Her record of daily events increasingly reveals her financial difficulties, her frustration with the religious policies of William of Orange, and her active support of her favourite Episcopalian ministers Simon Couper and James Græme during their disputes with the Presbyterians. In addition, Halkett spent the rest of her allotted five hours of devotion a day to writing ‘select meditations’ which were predominantly concerned with analysis of specific biblical books (including Exodus, Jonah and Nehemiah). In the final existing volume, Halkett records her decision to give her books to her ministers, ‘fearing when I was dead if undisposed of, they might fall into such hands as



might make ill use of them’.⁹ Couper did indeed publish some of Halkett’s ‘Select Meditations’ between 1701 and 1704. Useful as these texts were to Couper for his political agenda in the lead up to the 1707 Act of Union, their contents are not the most stimulating to a modern reader.

This is perhaps partly why the true worth of Halkett’s writing has not so far been fully recognised. Add to this that the art of the ‘occasional meditation’ had become so ubiquitous by the early 18th century that Jonathan Swift satirised the practice in *Upon a Broom-Stick* (1710), it is perhaps understandable that critics have not been immediately drawn to this material. However, I contend that the contents of Halkett’s extensive writings deserve far more detailed consideration from early modern literary scholars, historians and linguists, as well as those interested in women’s history in general or the local history of Dunfermline in particular. Despite her financial difficulties, Lady Anne Halkett spent a large part of her lengthy widowhood at Abbot House, in her room inscribing her life in writing. **nls**

Discover more

- ¹ Simon Couper. *The Life of the Lady Halkett*. Edinburgh, 1701.
- ² Joseph Hall. *Occasional Meditations*. London, 1630.
- ⁴ Robert Boyle. *Occasional Reflections Upon Several Subjects*. London, 1665.
- 3, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 from Lady Anne Halkett's 'Occasional Meditations.'

Shelfmarks and pages:

- ³ Shelfmark: Ms. 6491 (pp. 71-5)
- ⁵ Shelfmark: Ms. 6490 (pp. 84-9)
- ⁶ Shelfmark: Ms. 6490 (pp. 64-75 and 366-80)
- ⁷ Shelfmark: Ms. 6492 (p 83)
- ⁸ Shelfmark: Ms. 6491.2 - or page 2?
- ⁹ Shelfmark: Ms. 6502. (p 263)

Abbot House, Heritage Centre, Maygate, Dunfermline, Fife, KY12 7NE.

www.abbothouse.co.uk 01383 733266